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Abolition Church
Boston, Massachusetts
Suffolk County

HABS-2-74

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
District of Massachusetts

Historic American Buildings Survey
Frank Chouteau Brown, District Officer
Boston, Massachusetts

Abolition Church (Boston African American
National Historic Site)

8 Smith Court

Boston

Suffolk County

Massachusetts

HABS No. MA-2-74

Addendum to

Abolition Church

8 Smith Court

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ABOLITION CHURCH
(Boston African American National Historic Site)

HABS No. MA-2-74

Addendum to
Abolition Church
8 Smith Court
Boston
Suffolk County
Massachusetts

Location: 8 Smith Court, Boston, Suffolk County, Massachusetts

Present Owner
and Occupant: Museum of Afro-American History, Inc.

Present Use: Undergoing rehabilitation

Significance: Organized in 1805 as the First African Baptist Church, the Abolition Church was the first black church in Boston and is the oldest extant black church in the United States. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison organized the New England Anti-Slavery Society here on January 6, 1832.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of construction: 1806
2. Original and subsequent owners (partial list):
 - 1806: congregation of First African Baptist Church (continuous use by various black congregations)
 - 1898: purchased by Congregation Lebariz for use as a synagogue (continuous use as a synagogue until 1971)
 - 1972: Museum of Afro-American History, Inc.
3. Builders: members of the original congregation
4. Original plans and construction: It is probable that the craftspeople building the church were influenced by Asher Benjamin's plans for the (new) Old West Church and Charles Street Meeting House in Boston. There is evidence that salvage from the original Old West Church was incorporated into the Abolition Church.
5. Alterations and additions: The building was damaged by fire in 1973 and is undergoing rehabilitation. An 1850s renovation probably included relocation of the stairs, construction of the curved double ogee wall between the narthex and the sanctuary, and the installation of arched rather than rectangular windows facing Smith Court.

- B. Historical Context: This church was organized in 1805 by Reverend Thomas Paul and 20 others as the first black church in Boston. The building was built a year later. As the only sizable meeting place owned by blacks in the city, First African Baptist became the focal point of civic as well as religious activities. For example, a school for black children operated on the ground floor from 1809-1835 and William Lloyd Garrison founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society here in 1832 after having been denied the use of Faneuil Hall. The Abolition Church is the oldest extant black church in the United States as well as the oldest in Boston.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The meeting house is a simple Federal style building retaining much of its nineteenth century flavor.
2. Condition of fabric: The roof and interior were damaged in a fire in 1973 but rehabilitation is underway.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 40 feet wide by 48 feet deep
2. Walls: Made of brick laid in Flemish bond; front and side facades are four-bayed.
3. Windows: Four two-story arched windows pierce the upper floors of the front of the building, while the sides have double-hung sash windows on all levels.
4. Roof:
 - a. Covering: slate
 - b. Cornice: A brick cornice projects slightly beyond the plane of the front wall.

- C. Site: The church stands on Beacon Hill on a narrow court surrounded by brick and clapboard dwellings.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

African Meeting House (First African Baptist Church), National Historic Landmark nomination form, 1973.

Mitchell, Burditt, and Associates, Inc. Museum of Afro-American History, 1973.

Prepared and transmitted by: Holly K. Chamberlain, Historian
HAES, June 10, 1987